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ABSTRACT

Several administrative dimensions of a successful internship program in the English department of a four-year private college in Virginia are described in this paper. The paper begins by describing briefly the comprehensive internship program for juniors and seniors that was implemented with the help of a grant and under which six additional departments established internships. The remainder of the paper describes the following elements of the English department program: (1) governance, (2) academic and other prerequisites, (3) kinds of writing internships available, (4) soliciting internship sites and sponsors, (5) advantages of the intensive one-month internship, (6) reading and writing requirements, (7) supervision during the internship, (8) evaluating interns, (9) evaluating sites and sponsors, (10) responses of students to the program, (11) the effect of the internship program on the department, and (12) the institutional perception of the departmental program. A list of sample internship placements and follow-up academic assignments is included. (HTH)

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Internships in Writing

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Aided by a grant from the Bassett Foundation, Randolph-Macon College in 1982 established a comprehensive internship program for its juniors and seniors during the college's one-month term. Although the program's establishment followed by only a few years the approval of a Business/Economics major and coincided with the increasing popularity of this major among enrolled and prospective students, all academic departments were invited to establish programs under the auspices of the comprehensive program. Seven did, including the Department of English.

This afternoon, I intend to describe several administrative dimensions of this very successful program.

1. GOVERNANCE.

A member of the Department of English was asked by the chairman to supervise the departmental program. As supervisor, he recruits external internship sponsors, designs particular programs for particular English majors and writing minors, and evaluates student performance and the quality of particular internship sites and sponsors. He reports to the department head and to the college-wide internship program director, a retired Richmond, Virginia, C.E.O. recruited by the college specifically to develop this program. These reports are primarily informational: the department chairman could, of course, question the supervisor's work, as he could any of this member's departmental work; the college-wide director, however, can only question whether the program's "technical" requirements are being met: he cannot intefere with the academic aspects of the internships since they have been deemed a departmental matter.

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2. PRE-REQUISITES--ACADEMIC AND OTHERWISE.

Participating students must be juniors or seniors, must have taken an advanced course in writing (either "Advanced Expository Writing" or "Writing for Business and Government"), and must have earned a G.P.A. of at least 2.25 at the time of application for an internship. Students apply during the semester preceding the one-month term. At Randolph-Macon, the average freshman G.P.A. hovers around 2.0, so 2.25 by the end of the sophomore year is a mark of academic respectability, not academic mediocrity or survival. The registrar's office collects the applications and checks each one carefully.

The college also requires that the prospective interns be good representatives of the institution. The department has never had to wrestle with a "problem applicant," someone who due to personality, appearance, or character, we do not wish to place in a position where he or she could do damage to the college's and the internship program's reputation. If such a situation arose, the departmental supervisor would probably plead the inability to find a "suitable" placement, leaving the word "suitable" intentionally undefined.

Each intern must work on-site 132 hours or more to earn credit. A student who, in the judgment of either the departmental supervisor or the on-site sponsor, is not--for whatever reason--likely to meet this requirement within the time frame of the one-month term could be dropped from the course with either a WP or a WF.

3. THE KINDS OF WRITING INTERNSHIPS POSSIBLE.

The handout outlines ten sample internships. They range from government, hospital, and public service organization public relations offices to a federal

agency's personnel office and a prestigious Richmond law firm. Although most are geographically situated in Richmond, Virginia (15 miles to our South), a few are in Washington, D.C. (100 miles to our North).

4. SOLICITING INTERNSHIP SITES AND SPONSORS.

Several routes can be taken to find sites and sponsors. The college-wide program director inadvertently located one for our department: his son was a drinking buddy of the AAA of Virginia's public relations chief. The more usual routes have been (1) through the departmental supervisor's professional and personal contacts and (2) through membership in professional organizations such as the Richmond chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). The first route can be quickly exhausted; however, internship sites and sponsors located this way tend to be excellent because the interpersonal relationship between departmental supervisor and external sponsor is such that "whatever you think is appropriate" courtesy gives way to "here's what we need" frankness. The second route--through professional organizations--provides access to such recruiting tools as membership directories, monthly dinners, and monthly newsletters. Through such organizations, one can find out about already established internship programs, such as that sponsored by the Virginia Society for Hospital Public Relations and Marketing.

5. THE ADVANTAGES OF THE INTENSIVE ONE-MONTH INTERNSHIP.

Randolph-Macon academic departments that sponsor internships had the option of offering these opportunities to students during the one-month term or during a 14-week semester; all opted for the intensive short term. The feeling was

that immersion in a job situation was preferable to disjointed hours scattered throughout a week, through the semester. The Department of English, in particular, felt that a writing internship would work better if the intern were on the job 9:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday: the intern could then take writing projects from beginning to end through the several necessary drafts.

External sponsors have shared the department's feelings. In fact, several sponsors have indicated a marked preference for Randolph-Macon interns over those from other Richmond area institutions because Randolph-Macon interns could see a writing project or several projects through from start to finish.

6. READING AND WRITING REQUIREMENTS.

Interns do more than just a 9:00-5:00, Monday-Friday job and the writing connected with it. They are required to do academic reading and writing. As the handout should indicate, the academic work is geared to the precise nature of the internship. Usually, a text or texts are read; often, the academic paper requires students to compare textbook theory to on-the-job practice. A daily journal, both descriptive and reflective, is also required.

7. SUPERVISION DURING THE INTERNSHIP.

The departmental supervisor has a choice between directing internships in lieu of teaching a short-term course or directing internships in addition to teaching a short-term course, receiving a $200 per intern salary supplement. Either way, the supervisor is expected to communicate periodically with intern and sponsor and to visit the intern on-site at least once. Usually, one visit is sufficient to evaluate both the student's performance and the quality of the site and sponsor.

The Bassett Foundation grant provides money for entertaining external sponsors; therefore, the departmental supervisor can take internship sponsors (and interns) to lunch or dinner to discuss the on-going work. Sponsors have responded very positively to such business meals: they enjoy their lone reward; plus, they seem genuinely delighted to interact professionally and personally with college faculty.

8. EVALUATING INTERNS.

Although the student does academic reading and writing, this work is clearly not as crucial as the on-site writing and related work—in the eyes of the external sponsor, in the eyes of the intern, and in the eyes of the departmental supervisor. Unfortunately, this on-site work is not as readily evaluated: it is in genres unfamiliar to the English teacher; more important, it reflects multiple drafts with substantial and stylistic input from one or more writing professionals along the way. Therefore, when dealing with on-site writing, the departmental supervisor avoids grading per se.

The evaluative process, as a result, is somewhat subjective. The departmental supervisor reads the journal closely, looking at the actual on-site writing at the appropriate points; he then calls the on-site sponsor (usually a follow-up conversation to the one that occured earlier on-site). Based on this reading and this consultation, the departmental supervisor arrives at a tentative grade based on a scale something like the following: A—excellent writing, professional conduct; A- —very good writing, professional conduct; B+ —good writing, professional conduct; B—adequate writing, professional conduct; B- —fair writing, professional conduct; C+ —some significant problems with writing and/or professional conduct evident; C—more than some significant problems.

Then, the departmental supervisor considers the academic work and raises or lowers the tentative grade based on the quality of that work. Every signal during the internship tells the student that the on-site work is more important than the academic reading and writing; therefore, the departmental supervisor is careful at this point in the evaluation not to over-value the academic work, thereby sending a disconcerting if not infuriating contradictory signal to the intern.

9. EVALUATING SITES AND SPONSORS.

Although they do not receive a grade, sites and sponsors must also be carefully evaluated. We do tend to repeat desirable placements; therefore, we need to know which are desirable. Interns' comments and journals plus conversations, telephone and on-site, with sponsors provide the necessary information. In one sentence, we are looking for "natural" teachers who just happen to be in the working world rather than the academic one. Such sponsors are willing to instruct interns patiently and carefully. We are also looking for sponsors who enjoy their work and are willing, if appropriate, to help the intern along after the internship is over. The sponsor must realize that he or she is not simply gaining an extra worker. Yes, office output will likely increase with an intern on-board; however, especially at the beginning of the month, the intern may produce little of quality and the sponsor's productivity may well decline a bit as his or her time is spent instructing the intern. We are then looking for someone who will not be miffed by some short-term sluggishness in anticipation of long-term gains. (As the handout indicates, interns have generated quite a bit of valuable work for sponsors—work that, in many cases, would not have been completed without the intern's presence.)

10. RESPONSES OF STUDENTS TO THE PROGRAM.

"Doing an internship" requires a willingness to work 9:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday, rather than take a single course. Unfortunately, many students shortsightedly turn up their noses at the prospect of an internship: they would rather sleep late, "party" late. However, the ones who elect an internship respond very favorably to the experience and encourage others to sacrifice some sleep. The students appreciate the experience for many reasons: it clarifies career goals; it looks good on a resume; it may provide the intern with a "real world" referee; it may even lead to a job. A high percentage of interns have received summer job offers; a smaller percentage, full-time job offers. (One intern was even offered the position of her sponsor when the sponsor resigned two months after the internship ended.)

A few student comments should reveal the enthusiasm for the program on the part of those who have participated in it: a student who undertook two internships in public relations says that they were "the most beneficial courses I took in college because the hands-on experience exposes you to the realities of working and writing in a way the classroom setting cannot"; a student who interned at a law firm says that, "As an undergraduate with a keen interest in law, I found the internship experience . . . to be fantastically helpful and educational. It clarified my perceptions of the profession and taught me skills that will be invaluable to me in my first year of law school."

11. THE EFFECT OF THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM ON THE DEPARTMENT.

The Randolph-Macon Department of English is a very traditional one: literature is taught from traditional critical perspectives; freshman and advanced writing is taught as a service to the college, as a service to English majors who wish to have a limited amount of coursework in writing on their transcript, and as the essence of a writing minor. The writing courses, however, have the strong support of only a minority of the department's members; the majority view these courses as a drain on the department's real mission. The internships have helped change this prevailing attitude somewhat. The enthusiasm of interns on their return and the career boost the program has given graduates have caused several members of the department to speak of a career involving applied writing skills in the same breath as law school and graduate school as meaningful possibilities for our graduates.

12. THE INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTION OF THE DEPARTMENTAL PROGRAM.

The above account of the prevailing departmental attitude toward the teaching of writing suggests fairly accurately the traditional nature of the department. This traditionalism, coupled with the begrudging attitude of the department as it shoulders its service burden and the oftentimes ineffective job many department members do teaching writing, has led to a rather negative perception of the department on the part of the college as a whole. The department probably has been seen as being as far from "the real world" as an academic department can get. That the department opted to even set-up an internship program shocked many faculty and administrators at the institution!

The departmental internship program has not escaped the notice of the college community: probably because the placements have been excellent, and the students involved have said so on many occasions. Almost all are aware that

several of those supposedly irrelevant creatures, English majors, go into the working world and return with a strong career orientation and, sometimes, a line on full-time employment. The faculty most fully aware of the interns' work are the very worldly ones in business, the very ones who had the highest level of contempt for the Department of English a few years back. Their attitude toward the English department, although it has not changed radically, is nonetheless markedly less disrespectful.

I would like to conclude this presentation by mentioning an additional advantage of the internship-in-writing program. I have indicated how it benefits the student and the department. But it also benefits the college as a whole by increasing the visibility of Randolph-Macon College students and faculty in the area business community. The public relations value of this visibility is --I suspect--sizeable: it may translate into financial support for the institution; it does translate into consulting opportunities for the faculty; and it very probably translates into greater success in the job market for Randolph-Macon graduates, whether they undertook an internship themselves or not. The institution is perceived as liberal arts and relevant, not just as liberal arts. The tone of the comments from former external sponsors tells the story. A sponsoring lawyer says, "Randolph-Macon College is to be commended for encouraging such internships; they provide not only an opportunity for the students to learn first-hand whether they would enjoy the career direction they have chosen, but also a service to those who serve in a supervisory capacity." The executive director of a charitable foundation says, "We commend the English Department and Randolph-Macon College on the program as it gives the student information and experience necessary to make a career decision and confidence in acquired skills." A

government public relations director says, "Thank you for letting us participate in your internship program. I hope that you will consider us for future interns." A hospital public relations director says, "The administrative team at Richmond Eye and Ear Hospital was delighted with the first experience of having an intern from Randolph-Macon. I think that was obvious to you during your visit with us." And finally, a director of community affairs at a public service organization says, "I'm already thinking about assignments for next year's interns."

SAMPLE PLACEMENTS

Internship-in-Writing Program
Randolph-Macon College
Ashland, Virginia 23005

Placement	On-the-Job Writing	Academic Assignment
AAA of Virginia, Office of Community Relations, Richmond, VA	AAA Times, newsletter for garage mechanics, newsletter for employees, press releases, correspondence	Read Writing in Public Relations Practice; write paper comparing theory and practice
Richmond Eye and Ear Hospital, Administrative Offices, Richmond, VA	newsletter for doctors, newsletter for nurses, newsletter for other employees, speakers bureau brochure, conference brochure, press releases, advertising copy	Read Writing in Public Relations Practice; write a paper comparing theory and practice
March of Dimes, Richmond Area office, Richmond, VA	press releases; correspondence	Read Writing in Public Relations Practice; write a paper comparing theory and practice
Virginia Department of Agriculture, Office of Public Information, Richmond, VA	consumer information newsletter, brochures, radio script	Read Writing in Public Relations Practice; write a paper comparing theory and practice
Congresswoman's Office, Washington, DC	press releases, correspondence	Read Writing in Public Relations Practice; write a paper comparing theory and practice
Delphi Research Associates, Washington, DC	kits for foreign visitors on USIA educational tours, report to USIA	Read Writing in Public Relations Practice; write a paper comparing theory and practice
Rural Electrification Administration, Personnel Office, Washington, DC	brochure sent to prospective employees, job descriptions, form letters	Read Guidelines for Document Designers; write a paper on applicability of guidelines
Virginia Business, Editorial Offices, Richmond, VA	magazine articles	Read excerpts from Popular Writing in America; write a paper on the concept of audience in three media

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Placement	On-the-Job Writing	Academic Assignment
Internal Revenue Service, Richmond District Office, Office of Public Information, Richmond, VA	comprehensive speakers bureau kit, press releases	Read excerpts from Writing for Public Relations Practice, How to Write for the World of Work, Introduction to Rhetorical Communication, Principles of Speech Communication, and Guidelines for Document Designers; write a paper on the relevant principles in these texts to the on-the-job task
Mays, Valentine, Davenport & Moore, Attorneys at-Law, Richmond, VA	memoranda, judging philosophies	Read Legal Writing, Writing from a Legal Perspective, and How to Find the Law; write a paper outlining the essentials of legal writing

For more information on the Internship-in-Writing Program, please write:

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